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Comment

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Comment by the Editor

AN INDIAN PATHWAY

"Finally, on the 25th of June, we perceived on the water's edge some tracks of men, and a narrow and somewhat beaten path leading to a fine prairie". Father Marquette, whose words we have just quoted, and Louis Jolliet, his companion, stepped from their canoes to the west bank of the Mississippi; and on that summer day in 1673 white men for the first time trod an Iowa road to an inland town.

For a long time their followers kept to the waterways. Explorers and fur traders relied largely upon the canoe. With the coming of settlers the Ohio and Mississippi route and the Great Lakes route floated thousands of families into the West, and when they came to the far side of the Mississippi they squatted for the most part near the river. Dubuque, Davenport, Burlington, and Keokuk grew and thrived, but the interior prairie land was uninviting and fearsome. Where would they get water and fuel, building material and easy transportation if they did not stay by the wooded streams? When they left the Mississippi, they struck out to the shores of other streams and stopped. They optimistically believed in the navigability of the Des Moines, the Iowa, and the Cedar rivers, and tried to

make these waterways their arteries of trade and travel.

But just as in later years in the West the irrigationist spread his ditches out over the desert and made it fruitful, so the squatters soon began to stretch out lines of communication into the "fine prairies" and where these life-giving streams of transportation penetrated, settlements sprang up and prospered. The crude early roads, crossing the rivers at fords and ferries, gave way to Territorial roads and military roads and bridges across the inland streams. Then came, in many parts of the State, a glowing enthusiasm for "plank roads" and thousands of dollars were spent by enterprising towns on these wooden Appian Ways.

RED AND WHITE TRAIL MAKERS

Meantime for a score of years shining rails had been creeping westward, and when they reached the Mississippi at Rock Island in 1854, Iowa towns abandoned themselves to speculative excitement. Intense rivalries sprang up and neighboring towns forgot their friendship and fought for the favor of the railroad companies. They made extraordinary promises and voted huge sums of money, for they knew that the stream of immigration and commerce would nourish the towns along the railroad, and leave dry and withered the roots of the inland settlements.

The ground had already been broken at Davenport

for the Mississippi and Missouri Railroad, and Antoine Le Claire, whose life is an epitome of that romantic early period of Mississippi Valley history, had removed the first shovelful of earth. In his veins ran the blood of American Indians whose moccasined feet had deepened the buffalo traces into human roadways; as interpreter he had brought red men and white together in numerous councils, and had translated Black Hawk's dictated autobiography into English; and he had been one of the men who had helped to found and develop the town of Davenport.

Here was a bit of unconscious pageantry that has seldom been equaled in our history. In Antoine Le Claire the various people of the Valley were symbolized. He was an Indian, master of fourteen Indian languages and spokesman for Black Hawk. In name and by ancestry he was a French Canadian, a fur trader and the son of a fur trader, representative of that race that had explored the rivers of the Mississippi Valley. And he was an American pioneer, a sturdy white settler and the first postmaster of the frontier town of Davenport.

As an Indian he turned the soil of his ancestors' beloved hunting ground for the passage of the white man's railroad. The first locomotive that reached Iowa, after being towed across the Mississippi on a flatboat, was christened with his French Canadian name. And yet it is probable that his townsmen thought little of these relationships, but chose him

to break ground for this great enterprise because he was the leading citizen of their town, the benefactor of their churches and schools, and the most prominent figure in their business adventures.

The line of railroad begun so auspiciously at Davenport in 1853 reached Council Bluffs in 1869, and it was in that same year that the last spike was driven in a continuous line of rails that stretched from the Atlantic Ocean to the Pacific. Since 1853 Iowa has laid approximately ten thousand miles of railroad and the network of rails runs into every county and not many miles distant from every homestead in the State. But with all this progress we can not help a feeling of regret that in the obscurity of two centuries and a half we have lost beyond recall the trace of that "narrow and somewhat beaten path leading to a fine prairie", that early trail by which Marquette and Jolliet came into the land of Iowa.

J. C. P.